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SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN'S INTRACTABLE WATER ISSUES

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: Tajikistan's plans to develop hydro-power projects on rivers that feed transboundary water systems remain at the center of its poor relationship with Uzbekistan. The debate about water use has intensified this winter, as Tajikistan has accused Uzbekistan of blocking energy imports. Russia has been dragged into the fray, as Tajikistan lodged an official complaint about Russian President Medvedev's recent statement that appeared to support Uzbekistan's position. This issue will continue to plague the Tajikistan-Uzbekistan relationship, and there is little the international community has been able to do to improve the situation. End Summary.

SHARING IS CARING

¶2. (SBU) During the Soviet period, Tajikistan provided energy to Uzbekistan in the summer, when its hydro-power resources were at their peak. In return, Uzbekistan provided energy to Tajikistan in the winter, when it could draw from its gas resources. Uzbekistan relied on water flows from Tajikistan for irrigation and still does. This arrangement has broken down with poor relations between the countries since independence. Uzbekistan argues that Tajik water and hydropower projects threaten downstream water supplies that feed Uzbekistan's cotton industry. Tajikistan argues that Uzbekistan regularly fails to send energy in the winter and blocks transiting supplies - despite existing agreements - in order to blackmail and weaken Tajikistan.

¶3. (SBU) Under a 2007 agreement, Turkmenistan was to provide Tajikistan with 1.2 billion kilowatt-hours of energy every winter through 2012; Presidents Rahmon and Karimov signed a pact, renewed in October 2008, providing for that energy to be transmitted through Uzbekistan's power grid. Since the beginning of 2009, however, Uzbekistan has prevented the Turkmen energy from reaching Tajikistan. Uzbekistan has made vague claims that the energy is being held up due to technical problems on the power line, but most Tajiks believe Uzbekistan is blocking the energy for political reasons. Tashkent also has failed to transmit an addition 600 million kilowatt-hours of electricity provided for in a separate bilateral agreement between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. In response, on January 21, Tajik Foreign Minister Zarifi announced that downstream Central Asian countries would likely suffer water shortages in the spring because Tajik hydro-electric facilities would have to produce extra power to compensate for lack of imports, and in the spring would need to hold back water to replenish the reservoirs.

TAJIKISTAN HOLDING FAST

¶4. (SBU) This dispute is only the latest in the ongoing upstream-downstream conflict between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The international community, including the OSCE, UN, and EU, has sponsored or hosted conferences aimed at achieving a regional agreement over the last few years. Such an agreement would require Tajikistan to recognize that major rivers such as the Vakhsh (on

which it has planned major hydro projects such as Roghun) are parts of a transboundary water system, and that any project that could affect water flows would have to have the consensus of downstream countries (such as Uzbekistan). Proponents of this position, including UN representatives, argue that international law requires Tajikistan to recognize this fact.

¶5. (SBU) Tajikistan, however, rejects this view. Government officials have regularly argued that rivers such as the Vahksh are wholly within the territory of Tajikistan, and that Tajikistan's water projects are matters of national, not regional, interests. Qwater projects are matters of national, not regional, interests. They also claim that many of the proposed projects would not have the serious downstream impact that Uzbekistan fears. Government officials have publicly said that Tajikistan needs to develop its water resources unilaterally, and that water is a commodity, like gas or oil (see reftel). The OSCE Office in Dushanbe recently hired a Water Management Advisor to implement regional water projects. In a discussion with EmbOffs on January 27, she lamented that she would have to change the terms of reference for her job to strictly domestic projects, because the Tajik authorities would not approve any project involving regional cooperation.

WHAT DOES RUSSIA SAY?

¶6. (SBU) In reporting on President Medvedev's visit to Uzbekistan last week, Tajik media outlets quoted him as saying that "construction of new hydropower stations should be approved by all the Central Asian countries. A country cannot act in an isolated way; this will not lead to any results, or it will create tension which would be resolved by political, not economic, measures, not to mention more dangerous possibilities." Tajikistan interpreted this comment as Russian support for Uzbekistan's position.

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¶7. (U) This week, the Tajik Foreign Ministry sent a note of protest to the Russian Embassy in Dushanbe, calling the comments a "contradiction of Tajik-Russian agreements, including one on Russia's involvement in the construction of the Roghun power station on the Vakhsh River." Komersant, a Russian newspaper, reported that in response to the note, the Tajik Ambassador in Moscow was "summoned to the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where he received a scolding." Tajikistan's Ambassador in Moscow has denied this report.

¶8. (SBU) Comment: The Tajikistan-Uzbekistan battle over water resources is intractable; neither side will budge. The Tajik government's stance on water issues - particularly in relation to Uzbekistan - is one of the few issues on which it can count on broad public support. The fact that Uzbekistan often implies that if given a say it would not approve of any new projects on Tajik rivers almost certainly hardens Tajikistan in its position. Meanwhile Uzbekistan's annual contribution to turning out the lights in much of Tajikistan each winter only makes the need for more hydro projects more urgent for Tajikistan. Efforts by the international community to bring the parties closer to an agreement have been fruitless, and it does not appear as though a solution is likely in the near term. End comment.

QUAST